



# Workforce Readiness—The National Security Threat From Within

Military leaders urge further investments in health and education for Pennsylvania youth

## Acknowledgements

**Council for a Strong America** is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites five organizations comprised of law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, business executives, pastors, and prominent coaches and athletes who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

### **Mission: Readiness**

Retired admirals and generals strengthening national security by ensuring kids stay in school, stay fit, and stay out of trouble

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## **The Threat**

While external threats to America's national security are well-covered by headlines, few recognize the threat from within—the readiness of America's youth.

Our country's thriving economy is creating fierce competition for qualified individuals among all employment sectors including our Armed Forces. This tight labor market is complicating the U.S. Army's plan to grow the active duty force to 500,000 troops. It also contributed to the Army missing its 2018 recruiting goal by 8.5 percent, or about 6,500 recruits, while the Army National Guard and Reserve missed its 2018 goal by a combined 17,000 recruits.<sup>1</sup>

This problem is compounded by the fact that 71 percent of youth between the ages of 17 and 24 would not meet the military's core eligibility requirements due to inadequate education, obesity or other disqualifying health conditions, or having a record of crime or substance use.<sup>2</sup> Of the remaining 29 percent who would qualify, only 17 percent would be qualified and

available for active duty, and 13 percent would qualify, be available, and achieve a satisfactory score on the Armed Forces Qualification Test.<sup>3</sup>

Readiness concerns are echoed by the private sector. According to the PA Chamber of Business and Industry's 29th Annual Pennsylvania Economic Survey, employers identified "the lack of qualified applicants to fill job openings" as the "single most important issue" facing Pennsylvania businesses today. Further, "[only] 43% of employers rate the current [PA] workforce as either excellent or good, the second lowest on record and down from a high of 66% in 2012." Most employers identify deficiencies in both "soft skills" and "hard skills" among job applicants.<sup>4</sup>

**These numbers make it clear that we have more work to do in ensuring that young Pennsylvanians are ready for college or careers, including military service if they so choose. Nothing less than our economy and future national security depend on it.**



## Investments to Improve Readiness

The pipeline to a successful workforce depends on children of all backgrounds having the hard (academic) and soft (social-emotional) skills that are vital for success. Ensuring that all Pennsylvania students have the opportunity for a quality education, regardless of zip code and beginning in the earliest years of a child's life, can help ensure more of our commonwealth's children are developing these skills.

### ***Early Care and Education:***

The birth-to-age-five time frame is the most dramatic period of brain development.<sup>5</sup> During these years, more than one million new neural connections form every second. This early foundation informs children's cognition, health, and behavior throughout life.

### **Academic Benefits:**

A longitudinal study of more than 1,300 young children found that those children in higher-quality child care were better prepared for school at age four compared

to children in lower-quality child care. At age 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers.<sup>6</sup> A recent study found that high-quality, full-day child care had a positive impact on children's language development at age two.<sup>7</sup>

When combined with high-quality preschool, child care can have an even greater impact on academic achievement. For example:

- **Ready for school:** Boston's pre-k program improved mathematics, literacy and language skills among participating children equivalent to seven months of additional learning, compared with children who did not attend.<sup>8</sup> State pre-k programs are also reporting similar important improvements in academic skills among the children that participate in their programs.<sup>9</sup>
- **Not Held Back in School:** Participants in Michigan's state pre-k, the Great Start Readiness Program, were held back in school 51 percent less often than nonparticipants.<sup>10</sup> New Jersey's pre-k



program found its children were held back 40 percent less often.<sup>11</sup>

- Gains in reading and math are sustained: North Carolina’s Smart Start and More at Four initiatives to improve early education found that the children in counties that spent more per student were two months ahead in reading at fifth grade and 1.5 months ahead in math by fifth grade when compared with children in counties that spent less per student.<sup>12</sup> New Jersey’s pre-k program, which served disadvantaged school districts statewide, reported that participating children were three-fourths of a year ahead in math and two-thirds of a year ahead in literacy in fourth and fifth grades.<sup>13</sup> These findings show that academic gains from high-quality pre-k continue to have a positive impact on students, and that investing in early education can lead to greater academic achievements later on.

### **Health Benefits:**

Obesity risk is shaped in the early years of life. Children who are overweight or obese in early childhood (which is the case for 14 percent of 2- to 5-year-old children in the U.S.) are four times as likely to become overweight or obese adults.<sup>14</sup> Early care and education that emphasizes healthy eating and physical activity can help reduce children’s risk of obesity. For example, a study of the Abecedarian program found that girls who participated were less likely to become obese as adults and boys had fewer risk factors for heart disease, stroke and diabetes.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, two randomized studies of nutrition programs in Head Start centers found that participating children had a lower risk of obesity two years later.<sup>16</sup>



### **Behavioral Benefits:**

Pennsylvania’s Pre-K Counts Public-Private Partnership program (the precursor to the current Pre-K Counts program) cut—from 22 percent to 4 percent—the portion of children at risk for problematic social and self-control behavior.<sup>17</sup> This program was also found to help children learn self-control and self-regulating behaviors, which lead to fewer of those children needing special education later on.

### ***Adequate and Equitable K-12 Funding:***

Adequately and equitably funded schools can help ensure that all students gain the knowledge and skills they need to be

career- or college-ready. Studies show that school finance reforms (SFRs) that invest in K-12 education over the long term can have significant impacts on student achievement.<sup>18</sup> This is especially true when additional school funding is directed to underfunded public schools to help those students most in need, is reliably available each year, and is allocated to improving the classroom and direct services to children.<sup>19</sup> In short, money (and how you spend it) does impact student success.

Research also shows that education funding affects longer-term outcomes, especially for children from low-income families. A recent multi-state study found that a 10 percent increase in per-pupil spending each year for 12 years is associated with:

- staying in school longer (nearly half a year);
- 9.5 percent higher earnings; and
- a nearly 7 percentage-point reduction in the annual incidence of adult poverty.<sup>20</sup>

## Funding Makes a Difference

When schools are adequately funded, they are equipped with the necessary resources to provide a quality education that leads to positive outcomes for students and their teachers. Below is a comparison of these outcomes:

### Sufficient funding

- Smaller class sizes so teachers can focus more on each student;
- Access to skilled teachers and critical lab, computer, and other equipment for STEM education;
- Increased learning time for students;
- Increased opportunities for full-day kindergarten; and
- Increased opportunities for diverse academic offerings and other specialty programs such as Career and Technical Education

### Insufficient funding

- Teacher layoffs that lead to larger class sizes and decreased instructional time;
- Cuts in academic courses and other programs; and
- Insufficient or outdated technology, science equipment, library resources, or even textbooks



## The Department of Defense's Child Care overhaul effort prioritized quality and affordability

**Quality:** The military now requires its providers to attain state health and safety licensure as well as national accreditation. Nearly all (95 percent) of military child development centers are accredited, compared to about 10 percent of civilian centers. If a provider is deficient in meeting these standards, the military will work with them to ensure adequate compliance. Providers are subject to four unannounced inspections per year, and ongoing noncompliance can result in closure and dismissal of staff.<sup>21</sup>

The education and training of child care instructors is another key indicator of quality. As such, the military child care system mandates a training program (including on-the-job training) and credentials as a condition for employment. This training is provided at no cost to the employee and it is linked to a career ladder that leads to increased compensation for each step. Additionally, the military system offers higher wages than civilian counterparts and benefits, which has dramatically reduced staff turnover.<sup>22</sup>

**Affordability:** High-quality early care and education is expensive, and most military families are unable to afford these costs in full. All active-duty military families have access to the system and receive financial subsidies to offset the cost. Fees for on-base programs are on a sliding scale, determined by family income. On average, these subsidies cover 64 percent of the cost. Families using programs in civilian communities receive a stipend to cover a portion of their costs as well.<sup>23</sup>

### Greater Investment Needed

#### *High-Quality Child Care:*

Despite the known benefits of high-quality early care and education, especially for at-risk children, many families have trouble finding and affording care. And, even when care is available, it is often low quality.

There are three main child care problems in Pennsylvania and across the U.S.:

**Access:** In Pennsylvania, 57 percent of all residents live in a child care desert, defined as an area where there are more than three times as many children as licensed child care slots.<sup>24</sup> Typically, availability is

especially limited for families who have infants and toddlers, work evening and night shifts, or live in rural areas.<sup>25</sup>

**Affordability:** Currently, parents pay an average of \$11,560 for center-based infant care in Pennsylvania, compared to \$14,437 for public college tuition.<sup>26</sup> This current average price does not represent the true cost of high-quality care. Child care, particularly for infants and toddlers, is unaffordable for many families, especially those with low incomes.

**Quality:** Only 43 percent of all child care in Pennsylvania currently meets high-quality standards.<sup>27</sup> Among the shortcomings in





quality are high rates of provider turnover, resulting in a lack of stable, consistent caregiving for young children.

Policymakers should boost the availability of high-quality child care for Pennsylvania's most vulnerable families by serving more infants and toddlers currently on the subsidized child care waiting list. Additionally, policymakers should solidify Pennsylvania's child care system by compensating quality programs at the actual cost of care, creating further incentives within Keystone Stars to expand the number of quality providers, and increase investments in the child care workforce to build additional high-quality capacity options for children.

#### ***Pre-K:***

Great progress has been made in Pennsylvania over the past decade to increase investments in publicly-funded, high-quality school day, school year pre-k programs.

The Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts program is now serving more than 25,000 eligible preschoolers each year. The Head Start Supplemental Assistance Program is currently serving about 6,500 eligible children.<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately, this progress is still overwhelmed by the remaining need as more than 95,000 eligible 3- and 4-year-olds still lack access to high-quality pre-k programs.<sup>29</sup> Policymakers should continue to expand access to high-quality pre-k in PA.

#### ***Basic Education Funding:***

State leaders made significant progress towards more equitable K-12 school funding by enacting the Fair Education Funding Formula that distributes education dollars based on student and community needs such as student enrollment and the percentage of students living in poverty. The new formula also takes into account district size, wealth, and the local tax effort.<sup>30</sup>



The Fair Education Funding Formula, however, only applied to new school funding appropriations made after the 2014-15 school year. As such, only about 10 percent of the state's Basic Education Funding is going through this formula.<sup>31</sup>

As a result, many schools in the Commonwealth still do not have adequate funding to ensure student success. In fact, Pennsylvania is home to the widest per-pupil spending gap in the nation between wealthy and poor school districts. This gap has a very real impact on students.<sup>32</sup> Pennsylvania's wealthiest districts spend 33.5 percent more than its poorest school districts, a gap significantly higher than the national average of 15.6 percent.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, an evaluation by the American Institutes for Research of Pennsylvania's School Finance system found that Pennsylvania "ranks third overall in the statewide percent of children attending severely financially disadvantaged districts, behind only Illinois and New Hampshire."<sup>34</sup>

Pennsylvania's overreliance on local property taxes to fund public education

has severely limited these poorer communities' ability to adequately fund their schools. On average, states across the country cover 47 percent of school funding costs, but Pennsylvania's state contribution to education funding is less than 37 percent, ranking 47th in the nation.<sup>35</sup> Here in Pennsylvania, local taxpayers cover more than 56 percent of public education funding on average—one of the highest rates in the nation.

Poorer school districts often struggle to fund their schools adequately because of depressed property values. This limits educational opportunities, like Career and Technical Education, for students in these communities and often fails to meet the goal of equipping them with the skills necessary for success.

Lawmakers must continue to approve greater long-term funding through the Fair Funding Formula to ensure that all Pennsylvania students, regardless of zip code, are ready for success in the 21st century workplace and able to serve our nation in the military if they so choose.

## Conclusion

Gaps in workforce readiness threaten our country's future economic success and national security. Continued investments in the health and education of young Pennsylvanians are needed to mitigate this threat from within.

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